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Little Solemn Mass

15 December 2023



Ashtead Choral Society – Petite Messe Solennelle by Rossini. 4 November 2023 at St Martin's Church, Epsom. A Review.

Rossini's singular foray into large scale religious choral composition, his 'Small, Solemn Mass,' is neither particularly solemn and certainly not small. Composed in 1863, more than three decades after his last opera, this work proved to be a captivating showcase for the Ashtead Choral Society. Their performance at St Martin of Tours church in Epsom was nothing short of remarkable, filling the space with a resounding richness and skilfully capturing the dramatic essence of the piece. The choir's meticulous attention to the wide dynamic range inherent in the work promised the audience an evening of exceptional musicality and jollity.

Commencing with the Kyrie, the choir adeptly conveyed the dramatic nuances of the composition. The originally intended accompaniment of two pianos (Steve Ridge and Simon Phillips) gave the piece depth, with the cheeky addition of the harmonium (Lucy Morrell) lending a bold, brash Parisian flair to the performance. The Christe, nestled between the Kyrie movements, showcased Rossini's mastery of polyphonic writing, with the choir executing a sotto voce Renaissance sound beautifully under the nuanced direction of their conductor, Andrew Storey.

The Gloria surged forth with intent and gusto, accompanied by impeccable diction from both choir and soloists – Lucy Cox (soprano), Susan Legg (alto), Adam Tunnicliffe (tenor), and Philip Tebb (bass). The quartet's balanced delivery set the stage for individual moments of brilliance with each soloist shining in their respective movements that followed. Ridge and Phillips provided impeccable accompaniment and all the soloists held the audience's attention throughout, despite the frequent repetition of material. The Gloria's culmination, Cum Sancto Spiritu, showcased the choir's operatic prowess, delivering long phrases with excellent shape, dynamic precision, and a deft handling of challenging rhythmic passages, leaving the audience breathless and ready for a break whilst anticipating more to come.

The second half commenced with the Credo and a robust entry by the tenors, imitated by a vibrant soprano sound calling the audience to "believe". This contrasted sharply with the smoothness and softness of subsequent phrases, allowing solo and quartet interjections to make a profound impact. The complex yet enchanting Crucifixus, beautifully sung by Cox, set the stage for the choir's triumphant return, Et Resurrexit, and a captivating 'Et vitam venturi' fugue concluded the Credo in grand fashion; the choir working hard to keep the sound clear and consistent and hold the audience's attention. Morrell's expert rendition of the Preludio Religioso on the harmonium preceded the choir's flawless navigation of the challenging tonal shifts in the unaccompanied Sanctus, where once again the dramatic shifts in dynamics held the attention.

The final movement, Agnus Dei, unfolded in true Rossini fashion, blending the operatic melodic line and dramatic flourishes from Legg with seamless interjections of religious chorales by the choir. By the end, one could not help but believe that one was not in an opera house in Italy with the curtain about to fall. However, in a final twist the piece ended with quiet, delicately placed chords on the piano combined with the bite of the harmonium, thus leaving the listener guessing as to the religious nature of the piece. Maybe then a final word from the maestro himself as he mused in his original manuscripts, "Dear Lord, here it is finished, this poor little mass. Have I just written sacred music, or rather, sacrilegious music? I was born for opera buffa, as you well know. Not much technique, a little bit of heart, that's all. Blessings to you and grant me Paradise."

Ashtead Choral Society's performance was a real cracker and fittingly full of vocal fireworks on bonfire night, leaving the audience with many tunes to hear over and over again as they went into the night.

David Preston

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